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Trump’s El Paso Visit—An Inappropriate Rhetorical Response

As a teacher and scholar of communication, I understand that normally the President of the United States travels to the sites of human tragedies and disasters. Under typical circumstances this is both expected and appropriate; it is a welcomed rhetorical ritual and gesture—what Aristotle in his Rhetoric labeled epideictic speech and also is called ceremonial oratory. The primary purpose of these visits is to console members of the community, helping them to heal and unite.

Yes, Donald Trump is the President of the United States and therefore has the right to visit. However, in view of his prior discourse and actions, Trump should respect the wishes of El Paso citizens—the majority of whom do not want him to come, believing it would interrupt their grief and healing and become an unnecessary distraction.

Trump's visiting El Paso at this time would not—in the words of renowned communication scholar Lloyd Bitzer—be a "fitting response to the rhetorical situation." The validity of this judgment is especially clear given Veronica
Escobar’s (El Paso’s member of the U.S. House of Representatives) insistence that “Trump is not welcome here...that he put the target on our back.” Her statement echoed a letter signed and sent to the President by concerned citizens of El Paso suggesting that “It is your rhetoric and actions that led to this terrible moment.”

Sadly, the President will not heed this reasonable recommendation. After all, as a colleague of mine observed, Trump embodies and enacts transgression of social and political mores—it’s who he is.

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